



Iowa Child and Adult Care Food Program Best Practice Tips for Mealtime

Step-by-Step Tips for Successful Mealtime

This is a list of mealtime ideas from child care centers in Iowa. Many thanks to those who contributed suggestions.

1. Wash hands just before mealtime. Washing hands in small groups under adult supervision is recommended. (Sitting on the floor for a story after washing hands may recontaminate hands.) Soap, running water, suds, individual paper towels and adult supervision are necessary for clean hands. Hand washing for each child should last 10-15 seconds. Play or sing a song (e.g., "Mary Had a Little Lamb" as a time frame for hand washing.)
2. Participants may help with table setting. Hands should be washed first. Instruction, observation and adult supervision are necessary to follow good sanitation procedures.
3. Have all foods, napkins and utensils on the table before anyone sits down at the table. A few extra clean utensils on the table in a small basket or on a serving cart near the supervising adult, will make it possible to replace dropped items without leaving children or adult participants unsupervised during meals.
4. Participants may choose where to sit or have assigned tables/seats using name cards, colors or shapes. Do not overcrowd tables because this encourages spills. Participants who need more mealtime assistance or more supervision may be seated near an adult supervisor. No more than 7-8 participants (or fewer if young children such as toddlers) and at least one supervising adult at each table is best. (DHS license capacity rules must be followed).
5. After washing hands, children should go directly to the table and wait until the supervising adult says they may begin passing or eating food. This avoids a lot of problems, spilled food, dropped utensils, etc.
6. To observe possible choking and to encourage appropriate sanitation, staff should be seated at the table during the entire meal service (beginning to end). If there is one supervision adult, she/he should sit at the side center, not at the end of the table to provide better supervision and to assist with passing foods. Two supervising adults at the table may sit at opposite ends or on opposite sides near the ends. To avoid choking, children should not be allowed to talk with food in their mouth or to be excused from the table if they still have food in their mouth.
7. Use small sized serving containers (pitchers, bowls) and utensils for family style service so participants can easily pass foods. Use two bowls (example: chili) per table because one bowl may be too heavy, too full or too hot for easy passing. All foods should be passed before anyone begins to eat. The "table helper" or the host may then say when "it's time for everyone to eat".
8. Children should be appropriately encouraged to serve themselves, and to taste/eat the foods provided. Children should never be pressured or forced to take or taste foods, and foods must not be used to discipline or reward children.
9. Eating or finishing a food should not be required before another food is offered or before the child leaves the table. However, if participants do not take foods the first time they are

passed, the supervising adult should encourage that food be passed (if there is food left in the serving containers) several times during the meal before anyone is excused from the table.

According to the “offer vs. serve” instructions in the adult meal pattern, adult participants may decline to take foods at breakfast, lunch or supper. However, they may not decline foods at snack.

10. Use “indoor voices” at mealtime. Speak with each child or adult participant at your table. Be relaxed, personal and speak with each participant by name. Talk about the foods you are eating; where they come from; why they are good for us; variations in colors, shapes and flavors. Mealtime is not a break time for staff, but is a continuation of the learning environment and provides an optimal opportunity to develop reading and math readiness skills through sense based learning, as well as food appreciation.
11. Mealtime manners or expectations should be simple and appropriate for the age of the participant. The rules should help to make mealtime relaxed, pleasant and positive for all.
12. Supervising adults should eat the same foods as children at mealtimes. Adults who positively model food acceptance and tasting new foods are the strongest influence on children’s food preferences. This important part of a quality child care environment should be written into staff job descriptions and part of center policies/procedures. If supervising adults need special foods due to health conditions or disabilities, this should be openly explained to children.
13. Having access to paper towels or sudsy cloths makes it possible for participants to clean up after their spills. This fosters feelings of competence. Participants should not be made to feel bad about spilling, but will learn that spills happen and the important thing is to make things right again.
14. Children can easily clear their meal setting. Children should ask to be excused from the table. If the child is no longer hungry, he/she may be excused. By excusing a few children at a time, the clean up area is less congested and there are fewer spills. Clean up can be at the dining table or at a clean up area. A clean up area should include a table to rest the plate on; a garbage can for paper waste and food scraps; a pan to collect dishes; a sudsy pan to pre-soak utensils; and sponges or paper towels to wipe their place at the table. Reading a book or working on a puzzle after clean up gives children who finish mealtime early a quiet activity near the eating area until others finish their meals. One supervising adult should go to the activity area with the children, but at least one supervising adult should remain with children who are eating to provide adequate supervision until all children are finished eating.
15. Participants need plenty of time to eat (possible 15-50 minutes depending on the meal type and the number of foods served), and should not be required to finish the meal. Even if participants choose not to take foods or to eat, they will benefit from socializing with the group at the table to talk, listen and relax.
16. A supervising adult must be seated at each table. This may include the teacher, teacher assistant, administration, volunteer, or cook. All supervising adults/mealtime volunteers must be trained in mealtime policies and expectations so interaction with participants will be consistent.
17. Supervising adults need a break time during the day to attend to their personal needs and to decrease job related stress. These breaks are an essential part of maintaining a quality care program. During these breaks, supervising adult may eat other foods of their choosing such as coffee, pop, etc., which should not be eaten in the presence of children.

18. A written Center Mealtime Policy should be developed which will describe mealtime policies and procedures, and staff mealtime responsibilities. This should be included in the Parent Handbook. It should be part of new staff training and should be posted in the meal serving area as a reminder to staff and volunteers. It is helpful to review mealtime procedures from time to time. Children or adult participants should also have mealtime procedures and policies explained to them when they first participate.
19. The director must take responsibility for developing and implementing mealtime policies and procedures. The director or authorized representative must adequately train and supervise staff so CACFP requirements are met. Staff members are responsible for knowing CACFP menu patterns, serving sizes and mealtime procedures.